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“Restructuring of Forms in American Patchwork”

Exhibition “Once Upon a Quilt: America as a Patchwork,” Fondation des Etats-Unis, 2-26 octobre 2016

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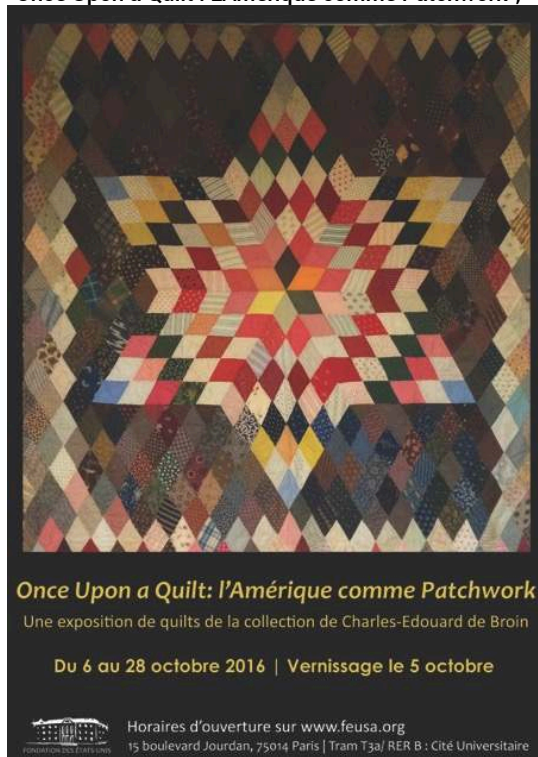
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"Restructuring of Forms in American Patchwork"

Exhibition "Once Upon a Quilt: America as a Patchwork," Fondation des Etats-Unis, 2-26 octobre 2016

Marva Mercedes Dixon

"Once Upon a Quilt : L'Amérique comme Patchwork",

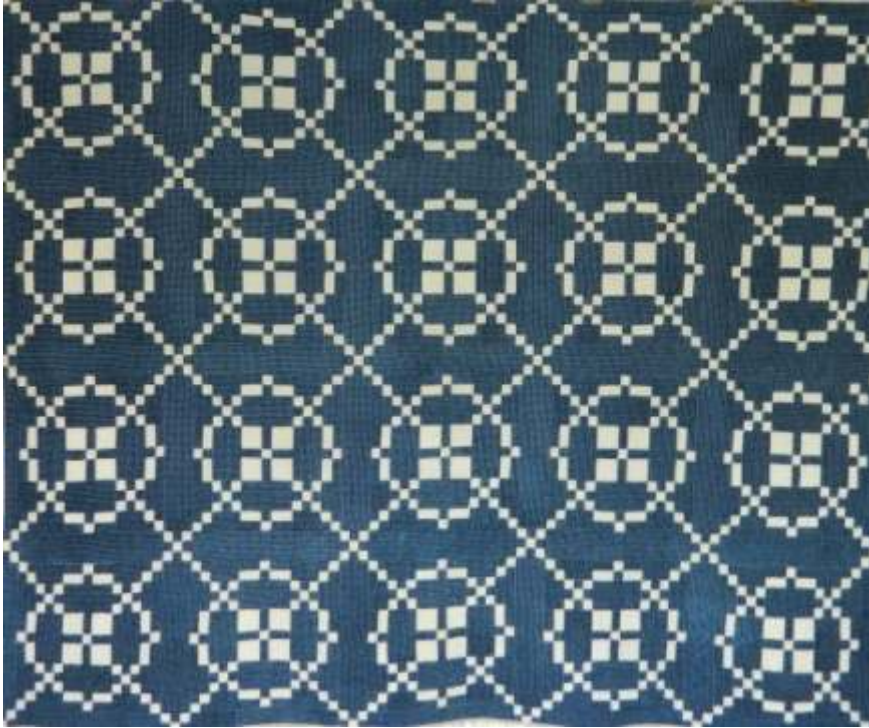


Fondation des Etats-Unis

- 1 Seldom does one see gallery walls dominated by quilts. Considering the level of creativity and skill required to create a quilt and the massive amounts of information

one can glean about culture and history from studying them, I find the art world's lack of appreciation for these objects curious. Noticing the absence, collector Charles-Edouard de Broin and curator Géraldine Chouard, both quilt experts, have dedicated decades to filling this void. One of their two exhibitions, "Once Upon a Quilt: America as a Patchwork," shown in the gallery space of the Fondation des États-Unis, at the Cité universitaire internationale aims to rectify this oversight.

- 2 At first glance, one is enthralled by the array of color, line and shape that has taken hold of the space. A medley of quilts, each with their own story, work together to transform the gallery walls into a series of histories. Some of these histories use symbolism to explain fictional stories or past events. Others provide clues of the owner's social status, geographic location and/or relationship with family and friends. In "Once Upon a Quilt: America as a Patchwork," 18 discrete quilts of the 150 in de Broin's collection have been selected to line the walls, hang from pillars and be draped over tables. The focus of this exhibition is American patchwork from the 19th and 20th centuries.
- 3 While it would be impossible to cover the entirety of American quilting practices in the course of one show, the exhibition provides a diverse set of quilts from the centuries covered.
- 4 Some, like *Burgoyne Surrounded*, serve as a retelling of historical events. This Pennsylvania quilt, created some time between 1910 and 1920, describes the Battle of Saratoga from the 1777 American War of Independence, which proved to be a turning point in the war.
- 5 It was constructed using a series of solid colored squares—white and blue. Many of the white squares are several times larger than those in blue, possibly representative of the arrogance of British General John Burgoyne. It was because of his underestimation of his opponent that the American Army won this battle. The American soldiers, like the blue squares, were more numerous than the British Army, surrounding them until they were forced to surrender. By use of size, shape and color, this original quilt represents a historical scene that was instrumental to the ultimate formation of the United States of America.
- 6 **BURGOYNE SURROUNDED**



Pennsylvania, 1910-20
190 x 241 cm

- 7 *Bars, Amish* is a quilt created by a member of one of Pennsylvania's several Amish communities. The Amish are made up of a group of people who choose to isolate and separate themselves from non-Amish societies. They are known for living simply, rejecting most modern technology in favor of the customs and ways of their ancestors. This quilt reflects their minimalist lifestyle geometrically. Instead of the intricate designs displayed on several of the other quilts in the exhibition, this piece, like most Amish design, follows an interesting yet uncomplicated pattern. In *Bars, Amish*, a split-bars pattern was employed. This centrally focused pattern has been preferred among the Lancaster County Amish located in Pennsylvania, and resembles an aerial view of farmland divided into rows of crops. This particular example is made up of large rectangles created in bold, jewel like colors of varying shades of purple and blue. Made primarily of wool, this object, like most Amish creations, most likely had a utilitarian purpose, almost certainly meant to keep warm as opposed to being purely decorative.

BARS, AMISH
BARRES / SILLONS, AMISH



Pennsylvania, Lancaster County, c.1930
180 x 192 cm

- 8 Also present in "Once Upon a Quilt: America as a Patchwork" is an overview of how the *Log cabin*, a fundamental pattern in American quilt making, constantly evolved over time. This pattern became popular during the American Civil War, possibly as a way to support Abraham Lincoln and his aim to preserve the Union; for over a century it has persevered as a staple of American patchwork. The *Log Cabin* outline traditionally consists of a square "hearth" surrounded by rectangular strips of fabric acting as logs. There is often a strong contrast among the colors of the logs with with one half using light materials and the other half using dark, thereby maximizing the visual liveliness of the composition. The show showcases several examples of this pattern along with its many variations, including the Pineapple and *Courthouse steps*.
- 9 A version of the log cabin design can be seen in *Log Cabin, Courthouse Steps*, a piece from around 1890 made of silk and lace. In this work the "Log Cabin" blocks are perfect squares with a hearth at the center. The fabric strips surrounding the hearth are arranged in a way that causes the logs to slightly overlap each other. Like traditional notions of the motif, half of the logs are light in color while the other half are dark. This particular arrangement has each block divided into four triangular areas with the top and bottom triangles mostly created using pale colored material while the left and right often fashioned with a bolder color palette. This is a popular version of the *Log Cabin* referred to as *Courthouse Steps*. In addition to contrast of pigment, this work, in using silk, velvet and lace, also juxtaposes texture while displaying an air of extravagance that was common in the Victorian era.

LOG CABIN COURTHOUSE STEPS, Silk & Lace



New York State, c.1890
162 x 164 cm

- 10 Created in 1940 by an African American artist, *Blocks, African American* further pushed the boundaries of the log cabin. Like classical renditions of this motif, the pattern blocks consist of a four-sided hearth surrounded by rectangular logs. Although each hearth is surrounded by only four logs—far fewer than most—the blocks retain the traditional color shift between light and dark strips. As was the case with *Log Cabin, Courthouse Steps*, the light and dark spaces are defined horizontally and vertically, lying across from each other as opposed to perpendicularly. Through abstraction, these basic components are transformed into a unique representation.
- 11 *Blocks, African American* strongly resembles the quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama. Gee's Bend is a small, African American community along the Alabama River known for a quilting tradition that pieces together strips a cloth in a way that is geometrically simplistic and vibrant in color. These quilts have been apart of several successful exhibitions in major museum spaces including the Philadelphia Museum of art and the Whitney Museum of Art. Like Gee's Bend's quilts, the artist of *Blocks, African American* used a minimalist approach to create a sophisticated design. This work avoids symmetry in favor of improvisation to express a variety of cabin proportions and dimensions. Like the jazz composer, the free-form pattern blocks produce a work that is complex in its spontaneity. The bold coloring and modest geometric design also bears resemblance to Kente cloths of Ghana.

BLOCKS AFRICAN-AMERICAN



Virginia, 1940
180 x 214 cm

- 12 Also evolving from the *Log Cabin* is the *Pineapple* pattern. Like the *Log Cabin*, the pineapple design retains elements of a hearth surrounded by logs. However, unlike *Log Cabin* and *Courthouse Steps*, the logs are no longer sewn exclusively parallel to the hearth. Instead, pineapple pattern blocks are created when logs are sewn both parallel and perpendicular to the hearth. The outcome is an extremely complex design that produces streaks of color radiating from the center of each hearth.
- 13 *Log Cabin, Pineapple*, created in 1870 in Connecticut, uses a variation of this technique. Made from an assortment of velvets and silks, the artist carefully constructed this piece as a series of hexagons, with each comprised of 6 triangles of color. Like classic *Log Cabin* designs, the colors often alternate between light and dark. The resulting composition resembles the symmetrical trefoil emblem used to warn of hazardous waste; this ends up further complimenting the quilt's explosion of color. "I've had this quilt for 30 years and every time I look at it, I see something different," de Broin said of this piece. Indeed, it is impossible to take in the intricacies of such a skillfully designed work within a single glance.

LOG CABIN PINEAPPLE



Connecticut, 1870
153 x 163 cm

- 14 For the next show (2-30 November 2016), the focus was on crazy quilts. As a preview, "Once Upon a Quilt: America as a Patchwork" showcased two examples. Crazy quilts are known for a style that lacks the repeating motifs seen in most quilting patterns. Instead of the symmetrical pieces of fabric employed by the traditional *Log Cabin* pattern, for example, the artist of a crazy quilt fits irregularly shaped fabrics together to create a jigsaw puzzle effect. These quilts are characterized by being creative and free flowing in a way similar to those of Gee's Bend. They are also known for being created with a multitude of colors and cloths that are often hand-stitched together with elaborate embellishments and embroidery.
- 15 *Crazy Quilt with a Swan* (1890) was created with a variety of velvets and silks among other fabrics. In addition to these lavish materials, it has several images of animals and plants appliquéd its surface. Among the horses, birds, flowers, it is the white swan that is most likely to draw the eye. Placed on a dark, triangular cloth, the contrast makes it stand out from the others. Constructed primarily in wool, satin and velvet, *Crazy Quilt Literary Ladies*, (1898) was created by a group of women who belonged to the Easton Literary Society in Pennsylvania. Like most crazy quilts, this one is characterized by its embellishments, here naive appliquéd representations of a horse, boots, a snowman and a ship. Additionally, this quilt has been initialed by Becky, Amy, Jill and Emma, the "literary ladies" who made it.

CRAZY QUILT WITH A SWAN



New York, 1890
145 x 202 cm

CRAZY QUILT LITERARY LADIES



Easton, Pennsylvanie, 1898
100 x 116 cm

- 16 At its base, creativity calls for the restructuring of known elements. The ability of quilters to invent patterns that were simultaneously familiar in design while also original in fabrication is a result of that creativity. With "Once Upon a Quilt: America as

a Patchwork," we are confronted with many ideas, including the reimagining of the *Log Cabin* motif. With it, viewers gain insight on how a series of patterns were used as tools for both self-expression and innovation to create utilitarian objects. By showcasing this line of thought, this exhibition works to further legitimize quilting as a form of art. "If it were up to me, quilts would spend much more time in art galleries and museums," Chouard commented during my tour of the space. After this exhibition, I must agree.

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